

Why Use Christian Conciliation?

When conflicts arise in our church, we first attempt to resolve them through our own internal procedures, which are based on biblical principles. If we cannot resolve a dispute internally, we have obligated ourselves to use biblical mediation or arbitration rather than resorting to civil litigation. When you join the church, we will ask you to make a similar commitment; but before doing so, we want to explain why we believe this process is so important.

Peacemaking has always been one of the most important ministries of the church. As we are reminded in 2 Corinthians 5:18, God "reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." One of the most powerful ways that we can encourage reconciliation with God is to promote reconciliation among people. When others see us resolve our differences in a loving and biblical manner, they are inclined to give more weight to what we say about the Lord (John 13:34-35; 17:20-23). On the other hand, when they see Christians embroiled in disputes, they tend to write God's people off as hypocrites and dismiss the claims of Christ (Romans 2:21-24). As the apostle Paul warned the Corinthians, legal conflicts between Christians can be especially harmful to the Kingdom of Christ:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another--and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers (1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

The Bible does more than just command Christians not to sue one another; it also sets forth a biblical process for resolving personal and legal disputes in a constructive manner. This process is sometimes referred to as "Christian conciliation." As indicated in passages such as Proverbs 19:11, Matthew 5:23-25 and 18:15-20, and Galatians 6:1, conciliation involves three basic steps: (1) when Christians are involved in a conflict that is too serious to overlook, the first thing that they should do is **meet together privately and in person** to try to resolve their differences; (2) if this effort is unsuccessful, they should ask one or more other Christians to meet with them and help them to seek reconciliation and a voluntary settlement to their differences (a process sometimes referred to as **mediation**); and (3) if they cannot arrive at a voluntary settlement, they should ask one or more other Christians to hear both sides of the matter and render a biblically based decision that both sides are obligated to accept (a process sometimes referred to as **arbitration**).

There are many benefits to resolving disputes through Christian conciliation. Most importantly, it prevents a public quarrel that would dishonor the Lord Jesus Christ and diminish the credibility and witness of His church. Conciliation also allows Christians to demonstrate their faith in Christ and their confidence in His teachings (John 13:34; 14:15; 17:20-23).

In addition, unlike a lawsuit, conciliation encourages forgiveness and promotes reconciliation, which can help to preserve valuable relationships and strengthen the church (Ephesians 4:29-32; Colossians 3:12-17). Conciliation also helps people to identify and deal with the root causes of conflict, which may include such things as pride, selfishness, fear, vengeance, greed, bitterness, or unforgiveness (see Matthew 7:3-5). This allows people to make changes in their lives so that they will enjoy more peaceful relationships in the future (Ephesians 4:1-3, 22-24).

Another important benefit of Christian conciliation is that it is based on biblical standards of justice and is less encumbered by the legal and procedural technicalities that create so much frustration in the civil court system (Proverbs 28:5; Matthew 23:23-24). Furthermore, conciliation is usually less expensive and time-consuming than litigation and generally allows more creative and satisfactory remedies (Philippians 2:3-4). Although conciliation is less complicated than litigation, it can produce similar results. For example, if arbitrators find that someone has committed a wrong, they can issue a monetary award for damages, and that award can be made legally binding and enforced just like any other judgment of a civil court.

Christian conciliation is especially beneficial for people who sincerely want to do what is right and are open to learning where they have been wrong (Proverbs 15:31-32). Conciliators can help them to identify improper attitudes or unwise practices, to understand more fully the effects of their decisions and actions, and to make improvements in their lives that will help them to honor and serve the Lord more effectively in the future (1 Peter 2:12).

We believe that these benefits are so important that we have adopted bylaws that legally commit us as a church to use Christian conciliation to resolve any disputes that cannot be resolved through our own internal procedures. We ask each of our members to make the same commitment by signing a membership agreement that contains an express commitment to Christian conciliation. By making these commitments, we are all promising that we will never violate Scripture by bringing a lawsuit against one another for a disagreement that arises because of our relationship in this church. Instead, if we cannot settle a dispute through our internal procedures, we commit ourselves to submit it to mediation or, if necessary, legally binding arbitration. If we ever need to use this process and cannot agree on who will serve as conciliators, the Institute for Christian Conciliation will help us to select godly people who are properly equipped to serve as conciliators.

Signing this agreement will not affect any of your other legal rights or responsibilities. It only affects how you will resolve conflicts with this church as a corporate entity, as well as with its staff, officers, and volunteers regarding anything they do in their official church capacities. This agreement does not affect your legal rights with regard to matters that are not directly related to membership in this church, even if those matters happen to involve other church members. (Of course we encourage our members to use Christian conciliation rather than litigation to settle any disputes that might arise between them, even those not directly related to church membership.)

Please do not hesitate to talk with one of our elders if you have any questions or concerns whatsoever about making this commitment.